

Rays of light

Top tech and a collaboration with the Manta Trust gives guests at the InterContinental Maldives Maamunagau Resort fascinating insights into an underwater world, finds **Tamara Hinson**

I'm not usually a fan of boardwalks or overwater villas. Holidays shouldn't be about leaving 20 minutes to walk from your accommodation to the bar, after all. But that changed when I arrived at the InterContinental Maldives Maamunagau Resort. My one-bedroom beach pool villa has everything a villa in the Maldives should have, including a beautiful infinity pool that sits over the waves. Its two-storey design is a refreshing change from the open-plan layout of many villas (the living room-like ground floor means that I can do early morning workouts, or watch TV, without disturbing my other half). But the best thing about my villa is the marine life sightings: from the huge bath positioned next to the floor-to-ceiling windows on the first floor I spy stingrays gliding under the surface. Plus, it turns out that getting to the accommodation is half the fun too. With the majority of villas positioned around an enormous lagoon – some on small sandbanks – the meandering boardwalks that connect them become my preferred viewing platform.

MARINE HEAVEN

Within 24 hours of arriving, I've seen sharks, stingrays and manta rays during the walk – or cycle – from my villa to the resort's main hub.

Its location works in its favour: at the southern end of Raa Atoll, near the northern tip of Baa Atoll, and just a short boat ride from Hanifaru Bay in the heart of the Baa Atoll Unesco Biosphere Reserve, this is one of the Maldives' most wildlife-rich regions.

And it's about to get even better, thanks partly due to in-house marine biologist Jess Haines, who set up a research base for the Manta Trust charity in the resort's dive centre in 2019. It is hoped that the team's work will help to make this a Marine Protected Area.

Manta rays congregate here to feast on plankton and enjoy spruce-ups at the "cleaning stations" – where tiny fish nibble off dead skin and parasites.

Guests can become citizen scientists on manta-spotting tours, and help take photos to add to Jess and her team's database, to help them identify individual mantas. ➤

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ABOVE: Aerial view of the InterContinental Maldives Maamunagau Resort, its pool area and a Lagoon Villa bathroom

Jess proudly shows me the mugshot of a recently spotted manta, taken by a guest and duly christened Manta Claus.

GRACEFUL MANTAS

Jess also runs Manta Retreats, week-long events where guests can learn about everything from manta identification procedures to the threats they face in the ocean – there is high demand in Chinese medicine for their gills.

Before we head out on the waves, Jess tells us the strict protocols that we must adhere to – including keeping a five-metre distance – before explaining some of the tech her team uses. This includes drones and the world's first underwater ultrasound scanner, recently invented by a team at the University of Cambridge, allowing researchers to learn about the reproduction cycles of mantas.

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“It’s wrapped up like a burrito!” says Jess, showing us an ultrasound shot of an unborn manta, its tiny wings wrapped around its body.

Above us, grey clouds hang low in the sky, potentially dampening our chances of a sighting, but suddenly our boat glides to a halt and we spot three mantas. They’re in no hurry to leave, and we spend 20 minutes in the water, watching these beautiful creatures slide through the ocean, their huge mouths agape as they feast on plankton.

How any creature can funnel vast amounts of food into its mouth while still looking graceful is beyond me, but as we clamber into the boat to make our way back to dry land, I vow to channel my inner manta when I work my way through the Fish Market’s menu later that night.

The seafood restaurant is one of a cluster of restaurants back at the resort; breakfast spot Café Umi transforms into a teppanyaki restaurant in the evening, and The Collective serves wood-fired pizzas and delicious gelato.

For fine dining, Lighthouse, with its cheery deckchair-inspired blue

and white stripes, can be found at the southern tip of the island.

Clients will also find a kids’ club, spa and fitness centre, as well as The Retreat, an adult-only area serving free soft drinks all day, as well as afternoon teas and alcoholic drinks between 5pm and 7pm.

This lagoon-side haven becomes my favourite spot, largely because of its position. If I’m feeling guilty for not making it into the water that day, I can still tick off some sightings from the sunloungers, courtesy of the rays, sharks and huge shoals of tropical fish passing through these bustling waters. **TW**

ASK THE
expert



Nikki Hain,
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“The InterContinental Maldives Maamunagau is close to a Unesco Biosphere Reserve right next to a lagoon – a renowned juvenile manta ray aggregation point, which means guests can snorkel with mantas year-round. The resort’s partnership with the Manta Trust means it’s the perfect spot to experience these gentle giants up close and learn more about them.”